

Island Hill



a story by Brooks Kohler

Oscar Maddingly lived in a remote part of Southeast Missouri on a blister of land known to locals as Island Hill. What made this place unique was that for miles around there wasn't another mound of dirt to be seen. Island Hill existed all alone, surrounded by farmland that was as flat as the earth could provide. From its towering peak, one could look for miles out over the landscape with bewilderment. Here, at the summit, the sky seemed to touch the ground as easily as the roots of a tree can be thought to embed themselves in the soil, and like a tree with eager branches, simply lifting one's arms high above the head made a person feel capable of escaping the confines of earth.

From its peak, easily seen were the rooftops of farmhouses where families lived, and men struggled to provide. Occasionally, a house in the flat lands would catch fire, and from the top of Island Hill, such a site was diminished by the perspective. This was the case at night when a burning home looked to be no more than a red ember in a fireplace. On Island Hill, isolated from the world below, it was easy to forget that somewhere in the darkness, there was a family losing everything. All that

mattered was that you were safe, high above the ground, and that below, terrible things happened, things that could not be explained, just accepted.

My family's farm sat at the bottom of the Hill near a stream of water called Cotton Creek. Our home was a modest homestead, a one-story house, with a red barn and twenty-two acres of some of the harshest soil God had ever created. In our family since the 1830s, the property had once belonged to a young, southern aristocrat with ideas of grandeur. Furnishing the acreage with fifteen slaves and enough cotton seed to make them labor continuously, he soon discovered all was not simple.

Back then, Cotton Creek was a wide bodied river that attached itself to the Mississippi like a hand in a firm embrace. For the plantation, the creek was the only route to that great highway leading to the Delta. However, in 1811, the Midwest experienced a catastrophic earthquake and, consequently, the river diverged from its course, leaving the creek to suffer for want of friendship as the river loosened its grasp. Almost overnight, the water level plummeted, and Cotton Creek became no more than

the shedding of a tear of its former self. Left with no viable way to get cotton to market, the plantation slowly fell into decay, and in March of 1829, my great-great-grandfather Sherpabon seized what was left of a young man's dream.

Oscar Maddingly was the patriarch of Island Hill, and in being so, he was oddly suited for the task. Nearly seventy years old, he was suddenly left to raise his three granddaughters when their mother and father perished in a hotel fire in New Orleans. When the tragedy happened, I was two months shy of being fourteen. Yet, the feeling was as profound as any I have felt in my maturity.

On that solemn morn in 1956, my father walked into the kitchen and placed the local paper on the table. We all gathered 'round: my sister Sarah, my mother, and me. At the time, Sarah was twelve, but I remember her crying. None of us knew Oscar's son or his late wife. They lived in Tennessee, which seemed light years away from our tiny spot on the globe, but simply knowing that there were three young orphans who would soon be our neighbors did something to both Sarah and me. From

that day on, we looked at our parents differently, afraid to take our eyes off them for fear that they'd be gone when we looked back.

On the day the Maddingly girls arrived on Island Hill, my mother took a basket of food to Oscar. Sarah didn't want to go, but Mother insisted she come and introduce herself.

"It'll be good for them," she said, "to have a friend."

"But I've never met an orphan, Mama!" replied Sarah, shaking her head in disapproval.

"Well, they're just like you, except..." My mother paused. Her voice trailed off.

"Except for what, Mama?"

I could tell she was thinking, thinking about what to say next, wondering how to pacify the curious mind of her daughter who only took hold of answers that made sense. "Well, they're like you in that they enjoy doing fun things," she said.

Hearing this, Sarah cocked her head to the side like an old hound waiting for a command. Then, with an enthusiasm that only youth can foster, she perked up.

"Okay! If you say so."

Standing on our front porch, I watched my mother hand Sarah the basket, and the two started to hike off toward the Hill. Looking back, my mother covered her eyes to block the glare of the noonday sun. “We’ll be back shortly, Taylor!” she shouted. “If your father wonders where we are, tell him we’re up at Oscar’s to meet the girls!”

With a wave, I bid them the best and Sarah spun around to do one of her famous curtsies, followed by a sticking out of the tongue. For a moment, I thought about chucking a rock, but it occurred to me that the mission she was on was one deserving dismissal of her crude gesture, not to mention my arm was already sore from helping my father earlier in the week with bags of grain he and I had stacked in the barn. So, I suppressed my impulse and walked back inside.

On the kitchen table was the newspaper, proof that my mother had tried to familiarize herself with the details of the accident and the names of the girls. The oldest, at fifteen, was named Katie. The newspaper gave her nickname in parentheses as Katydid, but little else.

Katydid was followed in age by her thirteen-year-

old sister, Lindy Lou. Lindy Lou had no nickname, but the paper reported she was as smart as a tack, meaning you couldn't get her to lift her skirt for a piece of candy or a vending slug, something the boys tried to get girls to do when nobody was looking. The description continued by stating she was very respectful to her elders, always courteous, and a member of the Mickey Mouse Club, which was sure to win her favors with my sister.

Finally, the last to be mentioned was nine-year-old Calla. Her name was as baffling as it sounded. In English, it meant lily and in Greek, beautiful. But to me, it meant several minutes of postulating as I tried to learn how to pronounce it. Unlike her sisters, Calla's biography was short and direct, only two letters, "d&d" or deaf and dumb.

I should note that not all newspapers were as blunt as ours, but it was our paper, and our view of the world, albeit how distorted. For 'real news' my father sometimes purchased the city paper, but it didn't give you information about who ate dinner with the preacher last Sunday or who was seen courting whom at the local dance.

Instead, the city paper placed a lifeless name to a tragic outcome and waited for the passerby to drop a quarter after reading the headline. And, when things mattered most, like three girls left to fend for themselves, the city newspaper didn't bother to mention a nickname, a girl's respect for her elders, or point out one would need attention more than most. If it did, it would have been local and unrefined. In essence, it would have been small-town.

Luckily for Katydid and her two sisters, small-town was where they were. Not much ever happened in a place too quick to judge and too slow to change. Folks kept to themselves, but not so constricted that a person couldn't find a shoulder to cry on. Everybody had a surrogate mother, and mine became theirs.

It was going on 7:30 p.m. when Sarah came bursting into my room. She reeked of musty sweat and rotten leaves, a sure sign she had found something to do while on the Hill. I, for one, didn't want her getting anywhere near me, but as a sister, Sarah always wanted to know what I was doing. This time, her presence had caught me on my bed, lying flat on my stomach and

reading a book I had checked out from the library.

“Taylor, what-ya-doin’?”

“Readin’”

“Readin’ what?” asked Sarah.

“*A book*,” I replied, sarcastically refusing to lift my head to see her standing in the doorway.

Sarah came to the side of the bed, but before she could climb up next to me, I pushed her away. Determined, she came at me again, and like before, I gave her a firm nudge. Over and over she did the same, until I finally gave in and allowed her to crawl up beside me. There she found a cozy nook on my shoulder that enabled her to peer down at the pages.

“*The Man with the Twisted Lip*. What kind of stupid book is that?” questioned Sarah, her warm, humid breath brazing my left ear.

“A Sherlock Holmes book,” I retorted, sternly. “Now leave me alone! You stink!”

“Don’t you want to know about the girls?”

“No!”

“*You sure? I’d hate to go to bed and not tell you about...*”

“Now, why would I want to know about a bunch of

goofy girls that come to live with Oscar, Sarah?”

“I don’t know, but they’re nice. The little one, though, she don’t talk or nothin.”

“She can’t,” I replied. “She’s deaf and dumb.”

“What does that mean?”

“She can’t hear and is not too smart in the head, kind of like you.” Making a quick jerk with my body, Sarah rolled off me and onto the floor.

Immediately, she turned into the persona of our mother by reprimanding my action with a firm, but cautious slap from her hand. “You will meet the girls!” she shouted, stomping toward the door. “You will meet them, Taylor Johnson, and you will like them! They’re our neighbors!”

It was a theatrical exit, but no doubt, one generated by an earlier conversation that took place on the Hill. More than likely, my mother had made a comment to one of the girls—probably Lindy Lou, the serious one—that I’d be good company. However, as I lay there, pondering over the mystery opened before me, I couldn’t help but be distracted by the thought of meeting the three of them. What would I say? What would I do?

After all, I was a boy, not a dog or rambunctious girl like my pesky sister. Besides, it wasn't right. It was one thing for a boy to trick a girl into something unchristian, but to be seen casually interacting implied sissiness! Satisfied that I'd be neither a part nor a participant in any such plan, I buried my mind back into the book and relinquished myself to solving a fictional crime before making any unnecessary connection to the opposite sex.

Nearly a week passed without confrontation. Oscar and his granddaughters kept to themselves, and my mother in her downtime continued to make random visits to the majestic peak of Island Hill. By now, I had grown interested in her reports of what the girls looked like.

Katydid, according to my mother, was tall and slim—the kind of girl you'd imagine holding a cola on a billboard sign. Her black satin hair was cut short at the neck, and her skin was peppered with freckles. She was quiet and shy, keeping to herself most of the day and only talking in the evening, mainly at dinner.

The youngest one, Calla, never said anything, but from the way my mother described her, it was a shame.

“The child is an absolute doll,” she confided at the kitchen table. “She has wavy blonde hair, that is not too light and not too brown. And her eyes are silver.” She finished by informing my father with a whisper, “They’ll have a hard time keeping the boys away from her. I hope she doesn’t get into any trouble.”

Hearing the comment, my father leaned back with a look on his face that signaled he had experienced an epiphany of sorts. Turning his attention away from his plate, he cast a sobering glance to Sarah, who sat innocently next to me, playing with her mashed potatoes. He did this only for a moment, then without warning, he looked at me.

“So, have you met the girls, Taylor?”

“Who? Me? No,” I replied.

“Well, why not? Sarah has.”

Sarah lifted her head and smiled. She loved recognition.

“I don’t know,” I continued. “I just haven’t.”

“Well, when you get a chance, take Sarah with you and go meet them. There’s no need to be unneighborly. Besides, in a few months you’ll be going to school

together and...”

“Yes, do that, Taylor,” interrupted my mother. “You’d probably get along well with Lindy Lou. She’s about your height and a reader.”

My father rolled his eyes. He was a kind man at heart, but never too sappy on the emotions. When he suggested that I visit Oscar’s home, it wasn’t to make friends, so to speak, but, instead, to show I had manners. But in a community where playmates became helpmates, any chance my mother had to introduce me to a potential girl friend, who in turn could become a choice for a wife, was going to be taken. So, with a nod, I ungraciously agreed and ushered the thought to the side, along with the gristle in my porkchops.

The next day I awoke with an unexpected vibrancy that helped to overshadow the qualms I was having about going to visit the Maddingly sisters. As the day drifted by, a thickening heat settled on the farmland. Fluffy clouds plumed in the southwest, and no matter how hard I tried, I could not escape the menacing presence of the Hill; it beckoned me to come hither, but spitefully I turned away and instead marched across the field to take a noonday

dip in the lukewarm water of Cotton Creek.

This time of year, mid July, the creek ran slow, and where possible, a skim of brown sludge hazed the shallows. Yet, there was one spot that never seemed to go dim. The locals called it the bluffs, a section of the creek where the muddy embankment yielded to an overhang of rocks covered in a cushion of moss. From this spot, cool water trickled constantly, and the pool below was deep enough to permit a barrel flop without injury.

On warm evenings, it was common to find kids gathered at the bluffs, but a crowd so early in the day was unheard of. Knowing this, I increased my stride the closer I came to the location. Removing first my shirt, I formed it into a small wad and tucked it under my left arm. Next, almost without thinking, I slipped out of grass stained blue jeans. Now, in nothing more than skivvies, I eased my way past the hedgerow that separated the field from the simmering creek bed.

With all my thoughts on nothing else other than plunging into the murky depths, I scurried toward the bluffs with the impatience of a salamander. However, my enthusiasm soon turned to scandal when, without notice,

I walked upon the scene of a young girl bathing in the creek.

Her back was to me upon first glance, but she sensed my presence and immediately submerged herself beneath the water, letting out a sound of surprise when she did.

Frightened as much as she, I darted off back to the hedgerow and quickly put on my clothes, making sure to do so before she saw me. While in the process of slipping on my shirt, the blurry image of a figure caught my eye through the foliage. Out of respect, I looked away and continued with my dressing. Ready to leave, I was surprised when from behind me I heard a soft voice.

“Hello.”

Turning around, my heart skipped a beat. It was the girl, the girl I had just moments ago traipsed upon accidentally, but this time, she was fully clothed with her hair a dripping mesh of tangles. On her face was a look of suspicion, as if I had seen something I shouldn't have. The whites of her eyes were a saturated red, and her cheeks were a bright pink, not from sunburn, but from crying.

Cautiously, I apologized. "I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't know anybody was here."

She raised her chin defiantly to my rebuttal. Slowly, she eased it down and peered at me with a stern lip and closed stare. "You sure you didn't see anything?" she questioned, seriously.

"Positive," I replied, reaffirming my plea with a subtle nod.

For a few moments, nothing happened. Both of us simply stood face to face, scanning each other's expressions for any hint that something else was brewing beneath the surface. Too nervous to speak and too bewildered to continue, she took the first step toward reconciliation by turning around and walking back to the rocky shelf of the bluffs.

Curious, I followed, and when we arrived, her first instinct was to settle next to a small travel bag she had brought along. Scrunching her bottom into the moss, she reached for the bag and opened it.

"Well, are you going to sit or stand?" she asked, brazenly.

Hesitant, I stood, frozen like a statue, my body

blocking the warmth of the sun and casting a wide shade over her fragile frame. Annoyed at my reluctance, she cleared her throat and leaned back to show that she preferred the blaze of the sun to my cooling shadow. Again, she made the request that I sit, and this time I took a place nearby, but not too close.

“Who are you?” she asked, pulling a towel from her bag.

“Taylor. Taylor Johnson.” I replied proudly, pointing in the direction of the farm. “And you?”

At first she didn’t answer, and after a few seconds of looking off to the horizon, I was curious to know if she would. But then, she looked at me with eyes that could filter a lie from thickest truth.

“I’m Lindy. Lindy Lou. Lindy Lou Maddingly. I live on the Hill with my grandfather.”

A cold chill came over me. I didn’t know what to say, or how to continue our conversation. Thus, with a stammer in my voice, I let go of the only words I had been taught to say when faced with grief, “I’m sorry. I read about your parents in the paper.”

Lindy tossed her head to the sky and covered her

face with the towel. Losing her parents at such a young age had thrust upon her a feeling of loss which nobody I knew could comprehend. While sitting there, I had the urge to comfort, to reach out and pull her near, but, instead, I held firm, acting both the role of gentlemen and listening friend. What transpired was a sunset testimony that eventually ended with Lindy's head resting peacefully against my shoulder with her tears being absorbed by the dingy cloth of my musky shirt.

Before returning to our homes, we agreed to meet up again the next day, and for the rest of the summer, I found myself with Lindy, either running the slope of Island Hill or chasing the sparkling fireflies at dusk in the fields surrounding Cotton Creek.

Sometimes, Calla would join us. The joy she expressed in her silence, simply from having a firefly tiptoe on her nose, was enough to make a person drop in awe as this uneven child, for the first time, was sharing in a moment reserved for 'us' who take for granted what comes so easy.

Last week I received a call from Sarah, who had spoken with Lindy in Montgomery. Unable to fend for

herself, Calla had long lived with her older sibling, Katie, in Baltimore. When I heard the news that Calla, only fifty-seven years of age, had passed away quietly in her sleep, my thoughts turned to back to my mother's vivid description: "The child is an absolute doll."

With Calla in mind, I opened my Bible for solace and made my way to a chapter that Lindy had once read to me. Her mother had read it to her and Katie as a way of showing how special their little sister really was. That verse was Psalm 116:6, and it reads, "The Lord preserves the simple-hearted."

At the time, I didn't understand, but now I do.

THE END

"Island Hill" by Brooks Kohler. (Published by Brooks Kohler in 2021 for the purpose of adding the story to the Internet Archive. Originally published in 2004 by Senior Views, a magazine based in Anna, Illinois.)

This story is fiction. Similarities to any person living or deceased are coincidence.